The IDLER

Public Occurrences, Comment, Excursions & Rational Entertainment

Nr 26 DECEMBER 1966 25c THE COPY

The Humanization Of Lyndon

THE DEATH OF A MYTH

In Which the Question is Raised as to Who's Afraid of LBJ (Anymore); Also: Peter Jay Examines the Politics and the Syntax of George Mahoney; Charlie McDowell Proposes a Plan to Stump the Pollsters; and a Baltimore Cabdriver Speaks His Piece; as well as Several Other Diversions.

Let us gather around the grave of the myth of LBJ. Killed in action, Nov. 8, 1966. (Next of kin has been properly notified but apparently refuses to believe the news.)

Born in the mind of Lyndon Baines Johnson, nurtured by an unusually fortuitous election in 1964, and brought to the flower of its maturity by the press, the myth lived a brief but happy life.

It sent congressional strongmen to their knees. It intimidated an entire federal bureaucracy. It hoodwinked the liberals, flimflammed the poor, and dealt the Negro cards off the bottom of the deck. And in its presence, the nation's journalists were more sore afraid than even the shepherds who spotted the angels of the Lord; and they went unto their cityrooms glorifying and praising LBJ for all the things that they had heard and seen, as it was told unto them by the White House.

But the myth was only as strong as the faith of those who believed it and, as the returns of last month's elections accumulated, a strange new thought entered the minds of many of the faithful:

"Lyndon Johnson is human."

The implications of this alien concept have yet to make themselves fully felt in Washington, but it has already revived the Republican Party, given strength to the weak, and made columnists more wary of their former unabashed admiration for the Johnsonian political skill.

The myth characterized this skill as being almost without bounds. And this characterization was a large part of the myth.

Mr. Johnson's skill is in the politics of Capitol Hill, a politics of a most parochial nature. One can gain tremendous national power on the Hill, but it is achieved by controlling a constituency of 535 men, not by earning a mandate from millions. The techniques learned there are not readily transferred to national politics of the sort that a President must master. Few of the powerful on the Hill are considered contenders for the presidency and legislators who do have national ambitions--such as the Kennedys--are apt to avoid the long path to congressional leadership that Mr. Johnson followed.

In the early months of his administration, Mr. Johnson could get away with just being that which he was best: majority leader of Congress. But as bill af-

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The Idler

Published 11 months a year in Washington, D. C., for the edification, information, and entertainment of its readers. Thirty-five Cents the copy. Three Dollars a year (Four Dollars abroad).

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Editor: sam smith
413 Sixth St. NE
Washington 2, D.C.
202-546-9662

Associate Editors:
Mike Bell
Erbin Crowell

Circulation, correspondence, coffee:
Sally Crowell

ter bill was signed, the need for Johnson the Capitol Hill croupier became less and the task of Johnson the President became greater. And his weakness, as a president and as a politician, began to become apparent.

Months before the election, there were warnings that the public was unenthusiastic about Johnson the President, that the people were unimpressed by his political mastery. Inflation, Vietnam, the mismanagement of new federal programs such as the poverty war, and mistrust of the man himself, were all factors.

Still, the Washington columns promised us that the President would display his customary skill and pull the election out of the bag. But as the vote neared, with the national Democratic party reported in a state of disarray, the best thing the President could think of was a trip to Asia.

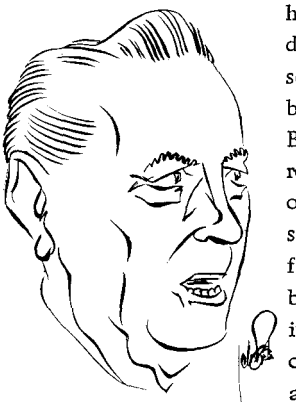
On November 8th, it became apparent that Mr. Johnson's much touted political **wizardry** had come perilously close to stopping at the Washington city limits. The President could still boast of "my legislation" but his mandate to carry it out had been severely shaken by the GoP gains.

The myth of LBJ was dead. Mr. Johnson was a human once again. (s. s.)

Mahoney: the castle crumbles

By Peter A. Jay

Maryland's unbelievable election is over now, and the hopes of George Perry Mahoney for high elective office have been dashed for the seventh and probably last time. But those who rode, battled, or simply observed the ill-fated Mahoney bandwagon on its careening course will have anecdotes to last them many a year.



MAHONEY

Whether he liked it or not, George Mahoney's campaign received matchless publicity. Try as he would to avoid the press, Mahoney knew that his greatest assets were his genial smile and his tireless shoeleather campaigning, and he came to realize that it is impossible to shake the hands of the multitudes without a certain amount of public scrutiny.

So wherever Mahoney went, chuckling reporters went also, taking the embaras-

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HUGH HAYNIE ...

"Koocnie-Koochie-Koo!"

sing films and writing the amusing stories that drove the candidate wild.

("What are you trying to do to me, writing that stuff?" Mahoney demanded one day of Charles Whiteford of the Baltimore Sun, who had reported one of the Democratic nominee's more outrageous outbursts. "You said it, George, not me," was Whiteford's reply.)

Mahoney's candidacy made the 1966 Maryland campaign the best reported in the Free State's history. For by basing his campaign entirely upon a slogan ("Your Home is Your Castle--Protect It!") which appealed openly to the anti-Negro, backlash vote, Mahoney drew national and international attention.

The British Broadcasting Corporation followed the campaign at length. ("You know," said Mahoney's Republican opponent Spiro T. Agnew, "when they send television crews to Maryland from Europe just to see if we're still swinging in the trees, we're in trouble.") Timesmen from Los Angeles and New York and a Sunday Timesgirl from London looked in from time to time.

(The young lady from the Sunday Times, after watching incredulously as Mahoney charmed an Eastern Shore dinner audience, ventured to describe him. "He's very ingratiating," she said, "but actually, you know, I think he's rather weak.")

Weak or strong, Mahoney, a 64-year-old Baltimore paving contractor who ran for the governorship three times and the U. S. Senate three times in the 16 years prior to 1966, made good copy.

Countless things about the man caught reporters' eyes. He dressed like a dandy, even though he was the son of a Baltimore policeman and was far more at home addressing a union hall crowd than fielding tough questions on state government. His speech was oddly sibilant, and he would frequently gesticulate in an almost feminine way when excited.

AGNEW

Then there was his grammar. A Washington Post reporter once informed Mahoney that his paper was sending a questionaire to each of the candidates and hoped to receive an answer. "You am?" replied Mahoney politely.

Once, at a Prince George's County Democratic gathering a week before the election, Mahoney rose to Agnew's challenge to "talk about the issues" and with the education question.

The first thing he would do as governor, he announced, would be to appoint a study group "to see if we is doing all

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we can in the field of education."

More striking even than Mahoney's syntax was his campaign staff. Eddie Helms, a bespectacled little karate expert from the Baltimore Police Department, followed him everywhere. Then there was a prizefighter named Tommy Ward; Lou Grasmick, a hulking lumber magnate; Paul Reed, the sleek campaign manager; Al Sattler, the guitar-playing court jester; a pleasant secretary named Blossom Grob; and an elfin press assistant whose name was Horace J. (Buff) Elias. One reporter described the diminutive Elias as "looking like a character in a Broadway musical--but not the lead."

Despite his unintentionally madcap campaign, Mahoney went into the election favored to win. For he had been cheered around the state when he promised to veto any fair housing law, and wherever there was discontent and racial bitterness, Mahoney bumper stickers appeared. Maryland is not above racist candidates: Alabama's George Wallace drew 43% of the vote in the state's 1964 presidential primary.

What turned the tide for Agnew? Three factors helped. First, there was Mahoney himself, caught in the merciless glare of national attention. Every time he opened his mouth, he put his foot in it. When he ventured into television studios, the genuine warmth of his personality evaporated and only his inanities came to the screen.

Then there was his opponent. Agnew, an articulate moderate, campaigned hard--if comparatively colorlessly. He focused on the issues until the last week of the campaign, and then began to lash out hard at Mahoney's lack of qualifications.

Finally, there was a healthy minority vote. Baltimore's Negro population voted for Agnew almost to a man, despite the presence in the race of a third candidate, liberal Baltimore Comptroller Hyman A. Pressman, running as an Independent. The vote in one Negro precinct outside of Washington was Agnew 361, Mahoney 14.

The results were Agnew 49.6%, Mahoney 40.6% and Pressman 9.8%. Mahoney, standing in the lobby of Baltimore's Sheraton Belvedere Hotel amid the wreckage of the first racist campaign he has ever run, conceded gracefully. Agnew smiled broadly. And Pressman, who used the

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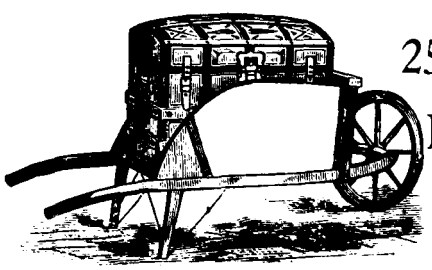

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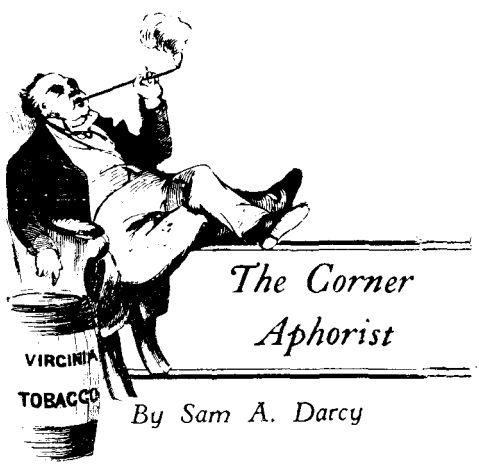
race as a tune-up for a serious bid to become mayor of Baltimore next year, cracked jokes.

That was the end of the story. George Mahoney, a decent, not-too-bright man who wanted badly to be governor and thought he could ride to the statehouse aboard a slogan, has returned to his Baltimore County estate and pulled up the drawbridge. He gave Maryland one of the strangest campaigns the state has ever seen, but that is poor consolation to a seven-time loser.



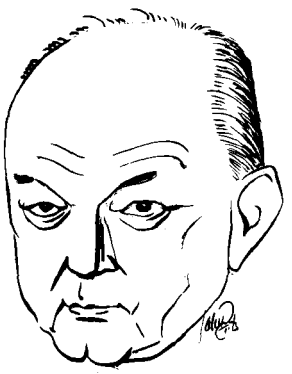
The Corner Aphorist

By Sam A. Darcy

►THE SOUTH KOREANS carried signs reading, "WELCOME BIG SHOT OF THE FREE WORLD." Cousin Barnegat, ex-chicken farmer, thought his banker was there. It was only President Johnson. What does a Korean know?

In Malaysia, Thailand, Australia, the Philippines and New Zealand, they rioted. Warm welcome. In Saigon, our largest ammunition dump blew up. Even warmer. U. S. aircraft carrier Oriskany and a minesweeper detonated. Horribly warmer. Then the Chinese exploded their nuclear bomb. Hot-- too darn hot. All in 17 days. LBJ wondered whether he should have seen America First. "OK," they told him, "but not in Asia." Don't those people know that our President is at heart for peace. In action? No. But in heart.

►SECRETARY RUSK (whatever happened to him?), once said that we're in Vietnam to stop Red China from taking over other Asian countries.



Just goes to show how dumb those Chinese are: while the US is bogged down in Vietnam they could be "taking over" almost unopposed. But are they? No. Well, what are they waiting for? Maybe they don't plan to do it--just to make Rusk look bad. See, you can't trust those Chinese.

►THE TWO MEN most responsible for spreading troublesome ideas are Mao in Peking and Brezhnev in Moscow. The minute they step out of their bathrooms in the morning our difficulties begin. Why not put a Marine right there to stop them before they start operating? Who listens to unshaven men in their underwear? The door to their bathrooms--that's the frontier to which we should push our national security.

HUMOR BOOKS

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►FROM OUR CORRESPONDENTS:

Linda Newman writes: "The older generation thought nothing of getting up at six in the morning; I can assure you the younger generation doesn't think much of it either."

Michael Temple writes: "Raising children is like baking bread; it has to be a slow process or you end up with an overdone crust and an underdone interior."

►DECEMBER IN THE OLD Roman Calendar was the tenth month of the year-- hence its name. Romulus put it under the protection of the goddess Vesta. That reminds us that when we were in Rome last year we saw the temple of the Vestal Virgins. It's closed now; shortage of help, no vestals.

The McDowell Papers

By Charles McDowell, Jr.

WASHINGTON

This country can avoid ever going through another election like the one just past.

Now is the time to go to work to improve the next one and set a new standard for all future elections in the United States.

What is needed is innovation, organization and the determination not to stand up and be counted until election day. What is needed, in short, is the League of Undecided Voters.

The League of Undecided Voters will address itself to some of the main faults that showed up in the election of Nov. 8, 1966. These faults have been showing up increasingly in American elections for the past decade or two.

There was not much suspense in the election. Thus it was not much fun. When you take the suspense and fun out of the election, you are left with one of the dreariest enterprises that mankind has conceived.

Apathy was everywhere, and the percentage of qualified voters who turned out was, as usual, a national disgrace.

What else can be expected when the pollsters tell us in advance, with scientific precision, who will win most of the races?

Why get worked up over a contest that has already been decided? Why get involved in a process that seems to have been taken over by computers?

Polls do more than ruin the fun and suspense. They solidify whims. They congeal passing fancies. They encourage bandwagon-jumping. They rearrange issues and transform candidates.

Many candidates commission polls to find out what issues are the most effective vote-getters, what the people would like to hear the candidate say about them, and what kind of fellow they would like him to be. The art of politics is becoming the art of reading percentages.

The League of Undecided Voters can

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cure all this. It can restore fun, suspense and a certain bumbling human authenticity to politics. It can put the candidates on their own again.

The mission of the League, or LUV if you prefer, is simply to encourage voters to say they are undecided. If 25 percent of us could hold out at undecided voters --about the candidates, the issues, everything--we could revitalize American politics.

It will not be necessary for a member of the League actually to be undecided. The important thing is the appearance of indecision. Every member will pledge to answer all questions from strangers about a pending election by saying, "Undecided."

Like any movement in politics, this one will have to be well organized if it is to get anywhere.

We will need "Undecided" buttons and "Undecided" bumper stickers. For the younger voters we will need signs that say "Undecided is Cool" and "Undecided About Vietnam." For demonstrative patriots we will need red, white and blue emblems saying "Undecided for America."

To offset the pressure from competing candidates we will need literature and television spots and in some places even sound trucks to promote the virtues of indecision. We will have rallies at which famous undecided speakers harangue great undecided throngs to keep up their enthusiasm for the cause.

We will have workshops for our door-to-door workers and "coffees" for undecided housewives. The League will have to go all out if it is to accomplish its great mission. We may even have to commission an occasional poll to find out how we are doing.

So let us begin. Sit down, Americans! Don't be counted until election day! Serve your country through indecision!

(Copyright, Newsday, 1966)

Hacking in Baltimore

By a Cabdriver

Baltimore is America's sixth largest city and its third largest seaport. It surely must rank as one of the gloomiest cities in the world.

For years, Baltimore frustrated North-South travellers with its miles of drab urban congestion which seemed to add an hour to the trip between New York and Washington. Now motorists can zip through the Harbor Tunnel without a stoplight between the new John F. Kennedy highway and the Baltimore-Washington expressway. The city has become perhaps the most forgotten big city in the United States.

Despite the new Charles Center and the business and financial districts, the inner city is one vast slum from the waterfront flophouses of Pratt Street to the shabby small businesses stretching along North Avenue, from Hilton Street on the west to Edison Highway on the east.

Office workers and executives who live outside the inner city see little of these slums, for an ingenious system of one-way avenues with staggered traffic lights allows them to travel quickly from downtown to suburbia. But driving the downtown area, unless you go up fashionable Charles Street, you cannot avoid glimpsing the slums, where I spend most of the time pushing my cab.

A good cab driver is sensitive, by necessity and choice, to the sights, sounds and smells of his city. Most people, when they travel in a car, roll

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up the windows, flick on the radio and transform their car into a little world unto itself. They look out, of course, and see things, but what they see they note only in passing.

But not the cabbie. The license to drive a cab is also a license to stare.

The nicest time for cabbing is early in the morning, from about 6:30 to 9:00. The city is clean with the new day, with little dust and dirt. The sun comes in at an angle with long shadows, and the air is cool.

There's not much money early in the morning and most cabbies usually start work around eight, just like everyone else. If you do start driving around six the best thing to do is to cruise for a little while and then stop at a favorite cafe and have a cup of coffee and read the paper. Or pull up at one of the bus terminals downtown and shoot the breeze with another cabbie.

Older cab drivers tend to like the day shift, usually from about seven to 3:30. The money's not so good, but it's regular and people are always where you expect them to be. Also, there's not so much danger of getting robbed. So the older guys drive during the day and leave the evening hustle to the younger guys.

Night shift is from 3:30 on. You can usually get out of the garage by four. If it's a weekday, you can always count on lady shoppers, so if you feel like smelling exhaust and bucking traffic and arguing with cops about left hand turns, you head for the shopping district. The alternative is to cruise main streets, away from downtown. This is easier on your nerves because there's less traffic. In general, you can do just as well away from the shopping district.

After seven p. m. it's no longer people coming home from work or shopping. You can't tell who you're going to pick up.

Weeknights are usually slow, but Friday, Saturday and even Sunday nights are fast as they can be. It's not unusual --especially on Fridays--to let one person out and immediately have someone else get right in. This is particularly true on Pennsylvania Avenue, the main business and entertainment section for the west side Negro ghetto. Many cabbies refuse outright to carry people to this section and certainly won't cruise there, so cabs on the "Avenue" are hard to come by.

A cabbie lives for Fridays and Saturdays. He can make between 30 and 50 dollars on either evening, depending on how much he wants to hustle and how fast he wants to drive.

And so here's me, with a cab and a license to stare all over town at all hours. Ball game nights I carry a little radio and listen to the Birds. No one yet has asked me to turn off the ball game. Usually the talk centers around Frank Robinson, the Orioles' star rightfielder. Or Brooks Robinson at third base, or Andy Etchebarren, the rookie catcher. You can hear the fans yelling "Boog, Boog" when Powell comes to bat. The National Brewing Company sponsors a "Home Run Derby" inning and one night Powell hit a homer for a man from Powellsville, Maryland. The announcer remarked they ought to make Boog honorary mayor. And yesterday I saw a "Powell for Governor" poster.

There are always merchant seamen from all parts of the world who can't speak English, but who hand you a slip of paper with their ship's name and where it's docked. This requires a good knowledge of the waterfront, and Baltimore's waterfront is huge, stretching from the Dundalk Marine Terminal on the east side of the harbor to Curtis Bay on the west, with the Canton area, the inner harbor, Sparrow's Point, Western Maryland Railroad Terminal, the Mary-

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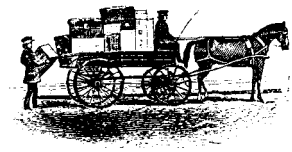
land Drydock and Locust Point in between. You can ask a watchman or a cop and usually get directions, out there where there are no streetlights, with long black warehouses and grain elevators and dark piers, with ships all lit up and docks festooned with lights when the ships are working.

The only ship people seem to know and visit is the poor old dilapidated Constellation tied up at Pratt Street. With no funds to restore her, she wallows at her oily berth with her masts chopped off to stumps and her bottom going to weeds, trash and garbage floating around her.

One night late I picked up three young Negro fellows on Greenmount Avenue, something that most cabbies, white or black, wouldn't do for reasons of race, numbers or section of town. I drove them down into east Baltimore, and while one of them was looking for a buddy of his, one of the other two bought us all sodas at a corner store and we sat there and talked. One of them had worked some time before as an "Arab" (pronounced A-rab), a street- hawker, selling watermelons. He said you can make up to 200 dollars a day if you want to put in the time and put up with a lot of crap. Baltimore still has many horse-drawn wagons, painted bright colors, with the horses wearing brass-and-bell-laden harnesses, which are used to sell and to collect junk. Periodically, there is a hue and cry to get rid of the horses, but they're still around.

Well, the guy found his buddy and I drove them back to where I'd picked them up. They paid their fare and gave me a good tip.



One thing I always chuckle about is the idea that here I am, the same guy driving the same cab and all the difsides I hear. A cabbie must be some kind of tribal confessor because he hears everything. The flag going down is the same as the slot opening in the confessional. Here comes a Jehovah's Witness riding from the Stadium to the Trailways terminal. I enjoy her telling me some of her private gospel. I let her out and at the next light tell the cabbie next to me there's a lot of business up at the Stadium. "Nah," says he, "those Jehovah's Witnesses give me a pain in the ass."

Man gets in and tells me how he had to move away from Hilton Street because the Negroes were moving in. The same night I take a well dressed and interesting Negro woman out to Hilton St. and leave her at a well-kept home. Was it his? Or was it next to his?

One night late I pick up a man in front of Penn Station. I've taken him home a couple of times before and say so. He says, "Well, it's the last time, because I retired tonight after 28 years with the railroad."

He shows me a watch his friends had given him and tells me he's looking forward to buying his first car and travelling around. A few days later I pick up a good-looking girl going to meet her boyfriend in a westside bar. She pulls

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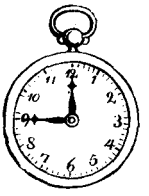

out a nude snapshot of herself and asks me if I think he'll appreciate her. Somehow, the watch and the snapshot try to balance each other out.

I like people who talk with me and joke around, who are out on the town for an evening or coming back after a vacation, people who are friendly and decent, happy to sit down in a cab for a a few minutes and be driven somewhere-home, or to meet someone they like, or to have a beer at a favorite tavern, or to go to a ball game. Most are like that.

One night I pick up a young fellow and his girl and take them down to the Civic Center where there's a rock and roll show. When I can't change a five, he says he'll get change inside and be right back out. There's a lot of traffic and a cop tells me to get going. When I tell him I'm waiting for my fare, he looks at me pityingly and informs me I am a dumb cluck to fall for the oldest trick in the book. Just then the guy comes back and asks if there's anything wrong. "No," says I, "the officer here bet you wouldn't come back, I bet you would, and I won."

Pick up a man on "The Block," Baltimore's answer to Las Vegas, and drive him out to Catonsville, one of the white suburbs. "Say," he says as we're gunning along Lafayette Street, "this really is a ghetto, isn't it?" That starts the conversation, and when we get out to his house, he insists on talking while the meter clicks.

"You mean you want Red China in the UN? You must be some kind of Communist or something."

"There's all kinds of communist countries in the UN. Why not China?"

So we talk about the "free enterprise" system and stockholders and "free" elections, and somehow I don't think I get across to that man. He says he's never met anyone like me and I say I've met plenty of people like him.

At the intersection of Franklintown Road and West Baltimore Street stand a church and a tavern. "Red" Burman, owner of the tavern was running for sheriff of Baltimore, and one evening, while I was at the stoplight, a pickup truck plastered with campaign posters and dragging a trailer with a small calliope pulled up and parked. The driver got out, turned on the calliope and started dancing around in a circle with a group of kids. There was a church service going on and like a shot, like an arrow, a man launched from the church, three or four steps at a time. Tremendous gesticulations, and with a few final tweets and blooeys, the wonderful sound collapsed. And the light turned green.

A few days later a young fellow hopped in and told me he had to "shoot some coke" -- cocaine. We drove to a rowhouse on the west side where he

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asked for Louie. He paid Louie $34 for four capsules of the stuff, told me where to take him next, and proceeded to shoot himself in the back seat.

Things don't balance out, really. The slums remain and grow to scare the suburbs, the suburbs to inflame the ghetto, the rich to frustrate the poor. The cops are more interested in busting Louie than in busting the person who gets it for Louie. The addict's world is no less real than the world of the person who pretends that everything is all right, that the bomb ticking under his bed is not really going to go off.

On a Saturday night, about a week after I started driving and still knowing next to nothing about the city, a cop hailed me on The Block and asked me to take a man to his ship. The fare was a big, black-haired Tunisian, with a heavy accent, who got in after thanking the cop, shaking hands, and telling me to "go, go, go."

Neither of us had the slightest idea where his ship was. I started driving towards Canton. I kept saying, "Why don't you get another cab?" and he kept saying, "Thees ees eet! Thees ees the right street." And "go, go, go!"

We found his ship down in Canton at the grain elevator, near the oyster shell pile. He paid me and then decided he wanted some beer. So I drove him to the nearest bar, waited while he bought a six-pack, and drove him back. He told me he had been all around the world "many times."

"I am a good man," he said. "I have a radio."

He had no money left to pay for the bar trip so we shook hands solemnly and the Tunisian got out. I watched him walking grandly and slowly down the pier, wearing a checkered flannel shirt and tough corderoy trousers, his arm wrapped around his beer. He was going to drink his beer and listen to his radio, He turned around and waved. So I waved back.

Sometimes when it gets rough cabbing, I think about the night of the Tunisian, because I don't think I'll ever see that good man again.

And I don't think things balance out, ever.

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